

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's garden

By Esther Baird
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BOSTON -

I'm typing this from my kitchen where I can see my neighbor's driveway. She's pulling her garden hose down to the front of her house where she'll water her beautiful flowers. It's 8:30 a.m. I watered my flowers at 7:30 a.m. Before the glaring sun began its morning beat-down on the front of our two homes. I would like to feel smug, but I won't waste my time. She could water her flowers once a week, with acid, and they would flourish.

Mine will, in a word, die.

Regular readers of my column will know that this is somewhat of an issue with me. My annual attempt to plant and grow flowers and, more impossibly, to keep them alive all summer, is a small obsession of mine. After all this is the Garden City. Living in Asphalt Town might have suited me better, but here we are. And I can sling around a bag of Miracle Gro with the best of them. But the only Miracle is that I keep buying the stuff when all the Gro-ing is going on next door.

I have a caveat. Some things do grow in my garden: Big bushy, green plants that eschew color, spread like mad, and choke off my flowers from view. Ladies and gentleman I present to you the overactive hosta, the exploding peony — sure it has hot pink flowers from May 16th till May 18th generally coinciding with a dreary rain — and finally the prickly, oddly named for looking nothing like . . . hens and chicks. These are the plants that I can grow. They create a wash of green against the backdrop of my . . . green house.

What I want is color in the form of flowers.

This year I decided to try something different — I stalked my neighbor.

My husband offhandedly said one day, "Just follow her and buy whatever she buys, plant whatever she plants, and water whenever she waters. Don't plant anything on your own."

Fine.

It's not very subtle but I blew past subtly last year when I had to replace my dead and shriveled hanging pansies three times in two months. I put the neighbor-copying plan into effect. She bought flowers at Folly Hill Farm, I bought flowers at Folly Hill Farm. She

said the plants weren't in good shape at the big home improvement stores, I didn't bother visiting. She bought Begonias, I bought Begonias, she bought Dianthus . . . well you get the idea.

My neighbor said to me, once she realized the funny way in which I seemed to plant all the same things she did, "You know, as long as you water them and prune off the dead flowers it's easy. Just don't buy pansies. They don't do as well as they should up here, plus that's the flower you always kill. Your garden looks great right now!" She tactfully refrained from adding, "It looks exactly like mine."

We stared at my "great" garden. I was weeding and my oldest daughter was "helping" me by digging up "un-ee-unns" despite my repeated, exasperated, instruction that they were not on-i-ons but rather the bulbs of my early-spring perennials. Meanwhile, between each weed-yanking and onion-rescue, I'd run up to smile at my new baby who was monitoring all of this dispassionately from her bouncy seat porch-side.

"See!!" I wanted to shout. "It's not easy to maintain a flower garden when you have two small children." But, I couldn't shout that very loudly standing next to my neighbor since her three small boys — all under four — were playing nicely in the driveway.

The plan worked until, well, until I stopped sticking to it. First of all, I chanced by a non-neighbor approved florist.

Secondly, they were selling huge flats of weathered "hardy pansies" for just \$8. Weathered, in that, I guess they had been left out in one of our little spring storms we like to call nor'easters. So they had holes thru their petals and their leaves had mostly been ripped off. They deserved to be planted like any other flower. And they were pansies — my favorite!

I realize my neighbor had expressly singled out the pansy as a flower I ought not to go near. But if I didn't rescue them who would? They are so happy and vibrantly purple. Well, the ones that are still alive are anyway. Half of them have inexplicably grown mold and rotted. I bet it's because I water them so early in the morning — not enough sun to bake the water out. Maybe if I wait till 8:30 a.m. like my neighbor does.

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